





# GABRIELE BASILICO: Beirut

"Because Beirut was never just a city. It was an idea—an idea that meant something not only to the Lebanese but to the entire Arab World. While, today just the word 'Beirut' evokes images of hell on earth, for years Beirut represented—maybe dishonestly—something quite different, something almost gentle: the idea of coexistence and the spirit of tolerance, the idea that diverse religious communities—Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and Druse—could live together, and even thrive, in one city and one country without having to abandon altogether their individual identities."

—Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, 1989

In 1991, one year after the end of a war that lasted fifteen years, the Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico was invited by the writer Dominique Edde to take part in a project aiming at documenting the central part of Beirut, recording with the camera what was left along the infamous and symbolic 'Green Line.' The result, while maintaining an objective and analytical edge, has an ambivalent and disconcerting feeling. It is a document of horrendous past and, at the same time a blue print for an unpredictable future. Basilico's photographs are much more of a question than a statement. Basilico looks at Beirut as if he were looking at any other city transformed, in a more subtle way, by a different disease than war, perhaps by social degradation, perhaps by wild and unconsidered real estate speculation. The Beirut photographs are not a judgment on war but a reflection on what a city is left with once war eventually ends and life resumes its course. The idea of the city remains intact even if its political and social structures have been attacked, and Basilico looks at this system as a doctor would observe a patient who survived a terminal sickness. He notes the damages while celebrating the incredible possibilities and perspectives that any kind of survival can produce. Beirut has survived not just a single war but hundreds of wars, and each dark window in each building represents one of the thousand symptoms that made this city a desperate case, an incurable patient. Yet it survived. Now it is up to us to decide if we are witnessing ruins like the temple of Bacchus at Basilbeck, or brutal scars left by human madness. In fact we have always assumed that the archeological sites we visit are the remains of great cultures and civilizations and not the results of ignorance and barbaric devastation. But even the Parthenon was apparently blown up by the Turks during the seventeenth century, so its present state is not primarily due to the erosion of time and history but to the order of some hasty commander. In the archeological museum of Florence, herds of tourists stand in line to admire a beautiful but badly cracked Greek vase. This fantastic object had to be pasted together not because it was found in pieces under the ground, but because a distracted guard smashed against it at the beginning of the century. It's a matter of creating a sufficient longing that allows us to judge devastation as history and not simply as human folly. Looking at the photos of Beirut, where buildings stand with no less dignity than the Colosseum in Rome's traffic jam, we have to consider how these images will be handled and how they will affect the future history of the city both in terms of architectural development and as a reference point of a time that runs the risk being forgotten. New building methodologies allow for both of the urbanistic structure and the conceptual dimension of any city in the world, in a matter of a few years, erasing devastation but at the same time canceling deep cultural experiences that belong to empty monuments. The sounds of shelling and car-bombs have ceased and Beirut is now deafened by squeaking cranes and the vibrations of jack-hammers. Gabriele Basilico's photographs are not only a pivotal moment in the life of this city, but they are also symbolic visions into the silence behind the blind windows of buildings and palaces.

Because as Thomas L. Friedman would continue: '(...) the real story is often found not in the noise but in the silence—and that is what is so often missed.'

—Written by Francesco Bonami/The US Editor of Flash Art Magazine and an independent curator and writer.



Rue Abdel Malak, Beirut. Gabriele Basilico, 1991



Rue El Mourad, Beirut. Gabriele Basilico, 1991



Rue Khayrallah, Beirut. Gabriele Basilico, 1991

## Projecting Beirut

Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of the Modern City: Interactive CD-ROM, Rodolphe el-Khoury, Hashim Sarkis and Allen Sayegh.

The interactive CD-ROM documents the urban history of Beirut from the 1830's to the present with an emphasis on comparing the construction of the city as the capital of the modern state of Lebanon during the 1950's and 1960's and the present reconstruction efforts after the 17-year civil war. The CD-ROM is part of an exhibition on the reconstruction of Beirut that will open at Harvard University, Graduate School of Design, on April 11, 1997. The two periods vividly exemplify the ambitions and struggles of both state and civil society to realize their (sometimes synchronized and other times conflicting) visions of what the urban environment should be. In that sense, the CD-ROM will also highlight the changing conceptions of Beirut's image as a capital city of Lebanon and its regional role. These two periods will be represented against a historical timeline of the modern history of the city. They will also be represented through major projects and plans (both built and unbuilt) by Lebanese and international architects.

The CD-ROM is presented in the form of four inter-referenced narratives.

1. Timeline overlapping the city's urban history with a political history of the Lebanon and the region. (This will be the portion of the CD-ROM that will be on display at StoreFront for Art and Architecture during the Basilico exhibition.)
2. Comparison between the architecture of the 1950's and 1960's and the present. This comparison will focus on such large scale undertakings as the city's Master plans (most of which remains unrealized), its major infrastructure, such as the airport, the port, and its extensive road network, the plan for the Central Business District, the government complexes, and institutions, as well as samples of the private development projects.
3. Morphological study of the growth of the city from the 1830's to the present highlighting the major periods of growth and the demographic and economical reasons behind it.
4. Biographies and significant projects of architects from the fifties and sixties and from the present. Architects such as André Wogenscky, Oscar Niemeyer, Alfred Roth, Alvar Aalto, and Rafael Moneo, and local architects such as Assem Salam, Pierre Khoury, Wassek Adib, Farid Trad, Antoun Tabet, and Jad Tabet.

The CD-ROM will be part of an interactive display in an exhibition at Harvard University Graduate School of Design opening on April 11 and will remain displayed until April 24, 1997. The exhibition will then travel to Beirut to open at the Lebanese Order of Engineers and Architects in October 1997. The opening of the exhibition at Harvard will also coincide with a conference that focuses on the rise of the modern period of the city's development. The panels at the conference are the following: the urban history of Beirut reconsidered in light of recent archival research and post-colonialists revaluations; recent archaeological finds and the means of their possible integration in urban reconstruction; the modern architectural heritage of the city as it has emerged out of debates and collaborations between local and international architects; a survey and analysis of the socio-economic context of reconstruction; and presentations and discussions of the recent projects and plans of reconstruction.

The CD-ROM is part of a series of projects undertaken by the Graduate School of Design on the reconstruction of Beirut which will take place over the coming years.

The CD-ROM is the product of work conducted at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, led by Allen Sayegh, instructor in the Department of Architecture, and including Markus Schaefer (MArch '98), Michelle Tarsney (MArch '98), Lillian Kuri (MAUD '96), and Ayman Zahreddine (MAUD '97).



The new headquarters for the UN-ESCWA in Beirut, designed by Pierre Khoury, currently under fast-paced construction to attract international organizations to the city center.



View of Place des Martyrs with the proposed visual connection to the sea, a revised idea initially proposed during the Khatib summit.

## Discussion Series

Tuesday nights at StoreFront

William Menking, Pratt Institute & Joe Kerr, University of North London

London Calling: From Team X to Gen X

March 25th, Tuesday, 6:30pm-8pm

English architecture and design has only intermittently impinged on the international consciousness. Its massive public housing programs aroused interest and respect in the 1950's and 60's. During the big boom Thatcher years its absolute surrender to the untrammeled forces of free-enterprise global capital aroused a kind of morbid interest. In the 1980's while American corporate practices happily transformed the London skyline, a new generation of British superstar architects (Rogers/Fosters and others) successfully sought markets world wide. Now the style press and critics alike seem intent on promoting London as a design center in fashion, graphic design and art.

However, British architectural culture has at least been partially redeemed by another tradition, an intermittent undercurrent of anti-establishment, anti-architecture, which has constantly challenged the orthodoxies of mainstream practice. Using whatever counter cultural imagery was at hand—the celebration of mass consumerism deployed by The Independent Group, the Americanism of Archigram's techno fantasies and Rem Koolhaas' 'Manhattanism' the clubland chic of Ron Arad and Nigel Coates—successive cadres of fringe architects have emerged to redefine the most English of qualities, 'hipness.' Today, a new generation of smart young practices like the women's group 'Mull' compete with each other in the hermetic laboratories of the architecture school unit system (transposed to America by Bernard Tschumi); the pages of specialist press and the limited public forums of competition and the exhibition.

The new prospects offered by a national 'Millennium' lottery have placed seductive commissions within reach, even for architects who previously scorned the compromises that the act of building entail. In some cases, this has merely highlighted the yawning gulf between the internal debates of architectural culture, and the conservatism of public taste—witness Zaha Hadid and the Cardiff Opera House fiasco.

Alternatively, it has offered an opportunity to build for major international practices like Herzog and de Meuron (Tate Gallery) and Daniel Libeskind (V&A Museum), a fast track to recognition and financial success for younger practices.

In a world where architecture is constantly being forced to adopt new strategies for success, from elitist posturing, to sound bites and naked commercial cunning, young British practices are leaders. However, in the image saturated unreality of a post-industrial world, where practices are no longer able to conjure up the simple moral certainties of those 1950's Team X enfants terribles, the Smithsons, we are perhaps witnessing in London the cultural apotheosis of Generation X.

### Peggy Deamer

'Theory as a Spatial Concept: Public Space/Private Longing'

March 11th, Tuesday, 6:30pm-8pm

This evening will present the work, in spatial form, of two artists/architects, Ann McDonald and Dean Sakamoto, whose work deals with the occupation of public space with private desires. As theory demonstrates in a masters program in architecture at Yale coordinated by Peggy Deamer, their work demonstrates the integration of research into the content of production as well as the production of theory in physical, not just literary, terms. Dealing with the issue of how to transform the notion of 'public' through an alternative practice of temporary spatial 'possession' these artists operate in a field of speculation introduced by Lefebvre and the Situationist International.